



# METRO DIGITAL INCLUSION ROADMAP

2023

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for FY24 through FY26



[www.nashville.gov/digital-inclusion](http://www.nashville.gov/digital-inclusion)



# BACKGROUND

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Nashville is one of the nation's [most digitally inclusive cities](#) and has one of the [most diverse tech talent markets](#) in the nation. Our rapidly growing tech economy offers new pathways for Nashville residents—if they have the digital skills to participate. In 2023, the National Skills Coalition reported that 92% of jobs required some level of digital skills.

The data was not limited to technology or general office work. The report also noted that half of construction, transportation, and storage workers had [insufficient digital skills](#) to do their jobs. The demand for digitally skilled workers is high in every industry. And this is not just about jobs. Mayor Freddie O'Connell's priorities for Metro Nashville and Davidson County are concerned with all factors that impact how we move, work, and grow. To take full advantage of improvements and resources that are being made available, our residents must have technology resources and support.

The conversation about digital inclusion centers on the expanding need for high-quality, reliable home internet and devices, digital skilling programs, and the technical and practical support to help people apply digital resources.

Today, technology is woven into nearly every part of our daily lives—how we work, learn, connect, and more. However, not everyone has the same access to digital tools and skills, which has widened the gap between those who benefit from technology and those left behind.

Recognizing this, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy People 2030 agenda identified five key areas that impact people's health, well-being, and quality of life: Economic Stability, Education Access and Quality, Healthcare Access and Quality, Neighborhood and the Built Environment, and Social and Community Context. These areas, called the [Social Determinants of Health](#) (SDOH), highlight conditions that can create both health opportunities and disparities.

Digital inclusion plays a crucial role here, intersecting with all areas of SDOH by empowering people through education, employment, healthcare, and social engagement. The National Library of Medicine even calls digital inclusion a “super-social determinant of health,” as it forms a foundation that can elevate all other areas of health and equity. Without it, there can be notable negative impacts.

For example, older adults who are disconnected can suffer isolation and loneliness that

places them at “greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death” (Department of Health and Human Services, 2023) that comes as a [direct result](#) of social isolation.

Older adults are not the only ones at risk. Despite popular opinion, most youth have only fragmented knowledge when it comes to digital tasks. A young person may be an expert with functional tasks related to social and digital media used for online communication but may not feel comfortable building a spreadsheet or completing a mail merge, basic skills needed to effectively perform office jobs.

High-need neighborhoods in Nashville often face intersecting challenges, from digital exclusion to housing and food insecurity, unemployment, neighborhood safety concerns, and incarceration. Many Nashville residents still aren’t fully aware of the resources available to them, digital inclusion or otherwise.

We need a tailored, collaborative approach that draws on the strengths of multiple Metro and community partners to reach those most in need.

Metro’s digital inclusion efforts date back to 1997, when Nashville Public Library held its first digital skills class. Since then, Metro departments—ITS, the Mayor’s Office, Metro Action Commission, Metro Social Services, Metro Housing and Development Agency, Metro Nashville Public Schools—and a range of community partners have joined together to close Nashville’s digital divide. The Nashville Digital Inclusion Fund, created in 2015 and managed by the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee, has been a significant catalyst, helping to fund these ongoing efforts.

Metro’s commitment to digital equity continued through the 2017 launch of [Connected Nashville](#), the city’s smart city plan. A [local needs assessment](#) completed in 2021 identified both strengths and gaps in Nashville’s digital inclusion landscape. As a result of the survey and to coordinate activities around digital inclusion within Metro Government and among area non-governmental organizations (NGOs), ITS named Metro’s first Digital Inclusion Officer. This position was launched with grant funding by Comcast, Google Cloud, and the Nashville Digital Inclusion Fund.

In December of 2021, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) launched the Affordable Connectivity Plan (ACP), a federal subsidy for home internet subscriptions and digital devices. This was put in place to address an urgent need: Families with serious income constraints not able to access the technology they needed to keep pace with the digitization of learning and work. With the transition to online learning, students who were already behind fell even further behind because of the additional hurdle to cross.

The ACP was in existence from 2021 through February 2024. But with [56 million people](#) eligible for the program, at the ACP closure date, only half of these households were enrolled in the program. Why? Many non-participants were lacking suitable devices, sufficient digital skills, and English language proficiency, among other barriers to accessibility.

Our work today focuses on addresses these additional barriers. No one can fully participate in today's world without being able to access and use technology and having a home internet subscription is simply not enough without the supporting services that ensure that people can leverage this resource.

Since 2020, all municipalities have re-evaluated the ways that we work, collaborate, and deliver public-facing services and the kinds of support we provide to residents who use those services.

Meanwhile, the Federal Government has given states and cities access to more than \$8M in digital equity funding, distributed among states and territories. These funds, along with funding from local partners (Comcast and The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee), serve as the current basis for Metro's digital inclusion work.

In addition to addressing multiple areas of digital equity, our goals over the next three years center on building sustainable digital inclusion programming by providing holistic support to the community. We do this through our work with all public, private, academic, and faith institutions within our digital inclusion ecosystem.

# WHAT DRIVES OUR WORK TODAY



- **Growth of Nashville** – Nashville is one of the fastest growing cities in Tennessee. Along with that growth comes a greater urgency for us to comprehensively map the digital inclusion assets and programs available to our residents to identify potential gaps and keep our residents from falling through those gaps. Our growth also contributes to the disparities that result in food insecurity and food deserts, housing insecurity, economic oppression, and poverty.
- **Equity and inclusion** – More than any other time in recent history, 2020 brought issues of exclusion to the forefront and exacerbated existing inequities. Digital equity is equity. This is not a new frontier. It is the continuation of our work to break down the barriers that keep humans from thriving.
- **Funding opportunities and access to programs** – 2021 brought expanded opportunities for state and federal funding for digital inclusion work, including the Infrastructure and Jobs Act, the “largest single investment in broadband and digital equity in the nation’s history” (Huffman, 2021). These opportunities are expected to continue for the next few years.
- **Resident demand: Enhanced civic engagement** – Metro Nashville residents are looking to us to keep pace with progress and provide them with different, better, and more inclusive ways to connect with Metro Government.
- **Infrastructure funding** – The federally funded Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program (BEAD) necessitates careful alignment between infrastructure efforts and community support efforts. Despite positive efforts being made to address access issues, adoption remains the greater challenge, and there are opportunities to build supporting programs that address needs around adoption, relevance, accessibility, and multiple other facets of digital opportunity.
- **Multiculturalism and cultural humility** – Nashville is one of the most culturally diverse cities in Tennessee. Nearly 12% of our residents were born outside the U.S. To ensure equitable delivery of services, we must apply cultural awareness and a growth mindset about cultural differences as a baseline to guide our engagement with the community.
- **Changing demographics of Nashville** – Nashville is not just growing; the population is changing. In addition to the 50% to 75% growth predicted by 2040, we can expect changes in the race, ethnicity, age, and even family structure of our population. Greater numbers of new immigrant families have already opened

our eyes to the need for more multigenerational housing opportunities. By 2040, estimates show that older adults will make up 15% to 17% of the regional population, while Millennials, shown to drive trends in land use and housing, will make up 17% to 25%.

- **Language access and accessibility** – Nearly 10% of Nashville’s population speaks a language other than English, and nearly a third of Metro Nashville Public School students speak a language other than English at home. In all, there are more than one hundred languages spoken in our city. Language accessibility is no longer an element of service improvement, it is a necessity to facilitate the delivery of multiple Metro services including emergency response and disaster response.
- **Lack of access to devices, internet, and training** – Many of our Metro Nashville neighbors still lack the tools and resources to enable them to function in a digital environment. As a result, they are unable to connect with the government effectively.
- **Structural inequities and racial justice** – The digital divide is nuanced – intersections of racism and poverty perpetuate digital inequities. Generations of structural inequities like historical disinvestment in neighborhoods and discriminatory housing policies mean that while we solve problems with connectivity and devices, we must also keep an eye on the intersecting areas of need that our residents encounter if we wish to change opportunity pathways for those historically disenfranchised.
- **Smart and Connected City Technology Deployment** – With digital inclusion as a “Super-social Determinant of Health” (National Library of Medicine, 2021), we can utilize technologies that give us insights into multiple aspects of resident health and well-being including economic stability, education access and quality, healthcare access and quality, and other Social Determinants of Health.
- **Workforce development** – Metro has already demonstrated a commitment to workforce development through programs like “Metropolitan Action Commission: Making a Change 4 Jobs” (MAC4JOBS) as well as internship programs managed by Metro ITS and other Metro departments. Locally, we have seen the growth of workforce development efforts, such as LocalTek and LocalTek Thrive, led by Blacks in Technology-Nashville Chapter. We have abundant opportunities to align our work with such programs as well as economic growth programs led by the Mayor’s office.

- **Administration Change** – A change in administration due to the 2024 election may bring a shift in priorities and goals of at multiple layers of government. Now more than ever, we must help our residents obtain the right resources and develop skills and that are future-proof.
- **Smart and Connected City Technology Deployment** – With digital inclusion as a “Super-social Determinant of Health” (National Library of Medicine, 2021), we have the opportunity to utilize technologies that give us insights into multiple aspects of resident health and well-being including economic stability, education access and quality, healthcare access and quality, and other Social Determinants of Health.
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# WHAT GUIDES OUR FORWARD VISION



- **Impacts of displacement** – Parallel to the impacts of population and economic growth are the long-term impacts of displacement on residents who are “priced out” of their existing neighborhoods, particularly those who are already struggling under the weight of intersecting oppressions. To support Mayor O’Connell’s work to ensure a culture of civic engagement where neighborhoods can advocate for their priorities, continued work to ensure affordable housing, and investments across all of Nashville’s communities, we must provide resources and support to make sure that residents – no matter where they live – can access and leverage city services.
- **Collaboration opportunities** – Because digital inclusion is not a one-size-fits-all approach, the key to customized solutions for individuals, families, and neighborhoods in Metro Nashville lies in continuing to discover and develop relationships that support collaboration. In addition to maximizing our effectiveness in serving the community, we must identify opportunities to share resources and prevent duplication of efforts between Metro agencies and between Metro, local NGO partners, and other stakeholders.
- **Grant opportunities** – While the current funding opportunities may continue to exist for the next few years, we must continue setting programs in place that position us to take advantage of future opportunities.



# OUR PROCESS



We developed this plan over three years in six phases:

**Phase 1 - Identify barriers to digital inclusion:** In 2021, in collaboration the Digital Inclusion and Access Taskforce founded by Dr. Fallon Wilson and Dr. Samantha Perez, we conducted a countywide digital equity needs assessment. The findings from the study are published on the [Nashville Open Data Portal](#). Key takeaways that informed our strategies were that:

- 89.7% of respondents felt the internet was very important in their lives.
- 18.3% of respondents reported not using the Internet at all.

**Barriers to use:**

- Access: 15.6% of respondents did not feel they had sufficient access to the internet and devices to meet their needs.
- Devices: 20.3% of participants reported sharing devices, most often laptops.
- Language: 17.7% of Hispanic/Latinx respondents reported that language was a barrier to internet use.
- Cost: 55.7% of people believed the cost of the internet was too high, but 62.5% of respondents didn't know of any low-cost options.

**Phase 2 - Understand the community context:** As part of our research, we conducted focus groups with local non-governmental agencies to lend context to the quantitative data we collected and help us better understand the community context.

**Phase 3 - Conduct partner meetings:** In 2022, we conducted a series of meetings with Metro partners to help us understand the Metro context within which we would develop and collaboratively execute digital inclusion programming

**Phase 4 - Draft the plan:** In late 2022, we developed a draft of the plan based on information collected over the past 18 months.

**Phase 5 - Seek partner input:** After drafting the plan, we distributed the draft to both internal and external partners through a process that culminated in a Metro review meeting in January 2023 with Metro leaders from the Mayor's Office of Economic and Community Development, hubNashville, Metropolitan Action Commission, Nashville Public Library, Metro Nashville Public Schools, Metro Development and Housing Agency, the Metro Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and Metro Social Services.

**Phase 6 - Publish the plan:** We published our first digital inclusion roadmap in February 2023.

# OUR GOALS



## **Foster collaboration**

- Work with Metro Development and Housing Agency, Social Services, Metro Action Commission, Metro Nashville Public Schools, and Nashville Public Library to identify opportunities for collaboration. (ongoing)
- Convene a group of partner non-governmental organizations with regular interactions to help us gather insights on how to better serve the community and continue to tailor our programming to support local priorities.
- Develop new and nurture existing relationships with partners who do work in the areas of digital skilling, workforce development, and needs assessment. (ongoing).

## **Build digital inclusion capacity**

- Help the community identify local resources by geography: Work closely with Metro's GIS and Data Insights team to map the data we gather through community inquiry.
- Digital navigators: Implement a digital navigator model developed by National Digital Inclusion Alliance to educate and empower local NGOs to address digital needs while delivering other life-improving services.
- Expand Metro's digital inclusion capacity: Identify, pursue, and achieve grant funding to develop community programs delivered by the Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County in collaboration with local partners.
- Help to identify funding opportunities for the community and work with community leaders to develop successful proposals, providing support and resources along the way.

## **Provide holistic digital inclusion support**

- Utilizing data collected from community research, develop a program that meets the needs of residents holistically, addressing all areas of digital inclusion. Partner with other Metro departments and agencies to execute the work. Support local organizations by expanding opportunities to offer targeted support to the people they serve. Offer services to residents that are delivered by people with similar lived experiences and in the languages in which participants are most comfortable communicating.

## **Use data and technology for community benefit**

- Collect new data: Building upon the data and analysis in the 2021 digital equity needs assessment, work with our research partners to develop a refined needs assessment. Share this data with the community and local partners to inform

collective efforts.

- **Mapping technology:** Work closely with the GIS team to understand the developing use of mapping technologies for departmental and community collaboration. Use these technologies to capture local needs in visual formats and further identify areas of highest need, down to potentially hyperlocal levels. This will further support NGOs in their work to serve the community's needs as digital navigators.
- **Website accessibility: Nashville.gov** - Utilize the expertise of the WebTeam to ensure continued expansion of multi-lingual access and improved ADA compliance processes.

## **Expand approaches to transparency**

- Work closely with the GIS and Data Insights team to understand the developing use of data visualization technologies to share our identified measures of program success.
- Publish asset inventory data on Nashville.gov.

# COMMENTS AND INQUIRIES

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Our community is at the center of our work. To provide feedback, ask questions, or find out how to participate in Metro Digital Inclusion programs, please email [dio@nashville.gov](mailto:dio@nashville.gov).

